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Prospects for Russian agriculture continue pessimistic

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Despite Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's announced plans to redirect management of the Soviet economy, dramatic changes in the critical agricultural sector appear unlikely in the next five years, according to a recent estimate prepared by the U.S. intelligence community.

The pessimistic conclusion was reached despite the long-term prospect of continued good weather in the Soviet Union.

Agriculture, for which Mr. Gorbachev was once responsible, went largely unmentioned in his Tuesday speech.

The key factor to grain production, according to intelligence sources, is climate. In contrast to general impressions, Soviet climatic conditions, they assert, have been improving generally since the 1930s

and '40s, interspersed with some adverse cycles.

Furthermore, analysts estimate that more precipitation and temperature increases — the result of global increases in carbon dioxide, the greenhouse effect — will help improve the prospects for grain production.

They point out, however, that the general trend has been punctuated by periods of bad weather — 1981 to 1984, for example — contributing to disastrously low levels of grain production for those years and making predictions on weather a chancy business.

Rising temperatures, according to the same analysts, also have had one negative side effect: They have worsened arid conditions in the south — the southern Urals, the lower Volga and Kazakhstan, grain-producing areas that account for 20 percent of Soviet production.

The most important element in

improving weather conditions has been increased precipitation, according to intelligence sources, a trend that began in the 1930s. The Soviet Union today averages almost three inches of rain more than it did 50 years ago.

U.S. intelligence analysts also believe that Soviet agricultural policy, in contrast to the weather is of secondary importance in affecting grain output. If this is true, it would undercut the importance of any new decisions made by Mr. Gorbachev.

Analysts also believe that while weather conditions have been improving in the Soviet Union, growing conditions remain comparatively unfavorable for grain production in that country.

Despite the prospect for generally good weather over the next five years, intelligence analysts do not believe grain production will average more than 195 million metric

tons — approximately 60 million tons below target.

The most optimistic projection assumes the weather in the next five years will match that of the 1976-1980 period — the best five-year average in the last 65 years — and further assumes that delivery of fertilizer will meet planned goals. In such circumstances, analysts believe, Soviet grain production could reach 221 million tons, still some 35 million tons below desired levels.

The most pessimistic scenario — and the least likely, according to intelligence sources — assumes weather conditions equaling the early 1960s, the driest in a quarter century, and fertilizer deliveries increasing at only the average rate posted for the last decade.

In that case, grain production could slip to as low as 165 million tons, forcing huge imports of grain, as much as 65 million tons, from

Western farmers.

Intelligence analysts expect, however, that even under favorable conditions the Soviet Union will continue to import grain from the West in the next five years, with the lowest estimate being 15 million tons annually.

The estimate, according to intelligence sources, indicated that importing grain at the higher levels could be done with available financial resources, but such purchases would strain the transportation system and mean a cutback on other vital hard-currency imports.

Nevertheless, intelligence analysts believe Soviet grain production could be improved by 12 to 14 million tons within five years if agricultural policy was changed.

They cite the possibility of altering the crop mix by increasing production of corn for wheat in irrigated areas, but a similar proposal pushed energetically by Nikita

Khrushchev in the early 1960s was reversed shortly after his 1964 fall from power.

Analysts also point out that only 2 percent of Soviet grain-producing land is irrigated — a total that accounts for only 6 percent of production.

They also believe that increases in grain production could occur if Mr. Gorbachev decided to buy more and better "agrochemicals," pesticides in particular, from Western suppliers and to improve application techniques on Soviet farms.

This is a longstanding problem, with the system of state ownership and control acting as a brake on the efficient use of available resources.

U.S. intelligence believes the import of agrochemicals is the most likely possibility rather than altering the crop mix. They report that the Soviets this year are already testing the use of imported chemicals on several million hectares.